

**WINDOWS TO THE SOUL**

The *fantastique* life of music  
photographer Jean-Marie P rier

BY ALICE PRICE-STYLES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN-MARIE P RIER



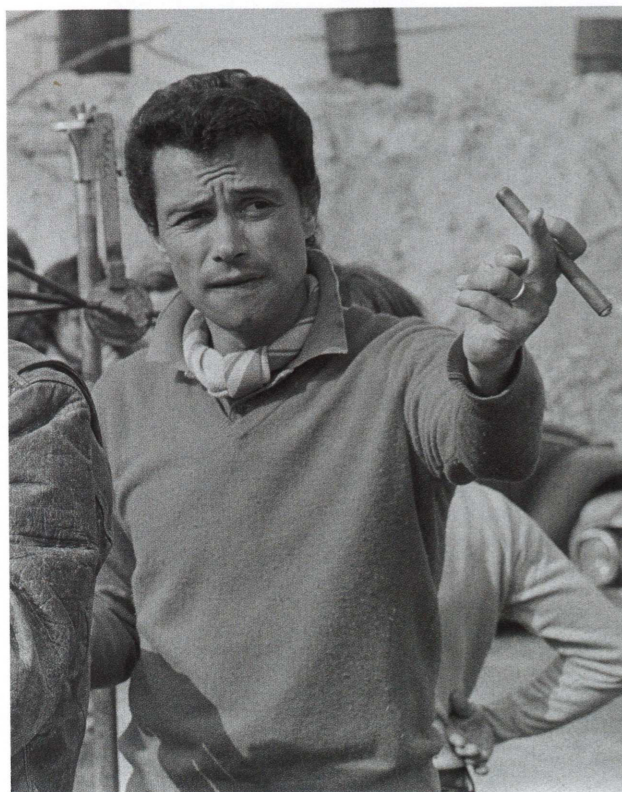
## Révélation

“Fellini takes me by the hand, and in a small car we drive through Rome. He took me to the Forum at night. At this time, nothing was closed, and you could go right in. I remember all my life: lit by the moon, we sat together, just the two of us, and for one hour, he told me the story of Rome, as told by him.”

The year is 1956, and Federico Fellini has paused the filming of his enchanting and now-classic work *Nights of Cabiria* to take a sixteen-year-old, somewhat lost, Parisian boy out for a midnight drive and to offer some guidance in life. The boy in question is a young Jean-Marie Périér, the renowned Parisian photographer synonymous with the yé-yé music movement of France in the 1960s; Jean-Marie was tagging along on the film shoot with his father, the movie's star, François Périér.

“He was telling me the plot of a movie he would make later: *Satyricon*. And I was stupid enough to not write down everything he said!” says Périér. “The only line that I remember is when he told me: ‘Don't listen to the teachers. Caesar was like that, and he was completely stupid. Don't listen to what they say.’ That was fantastic.”

For a man whose own life reads like a film script, full of cinematic moments and flamboyant characters, it is somewhat fitting that our conversation begins with recounting a memory



(above) Jean-Marie Périér, as director, on the set of the 1978 film *Sale Réveur* (Dirty Dreamer). Photo by Jean-Louis Atlan/Sygma via Getty Images.

from an actual film set. We are tracing back how Périér came to meet Daniel Filipacchi—the publishing mogul and jazz aficionado who would change his life forever by taking him under his wing and propelling him into the era's starry world of photojournalism—and find ourselves with Fellini.

“I was there hanging out at this film-shoot, and my father was asking everybody: ‘What am I going to do with my son? He doesn't know what to do. He was going to be a musician...’” At the time, Périér was going through an existential crisis of sorts. Born on the outskirts of Paris in 1940 to actors François Périér and Jacqueline Porel, he discovered at sixteen that his biological father was in fact the beloved French chanteur Henri Salvador.

“At sixteen years old, I learned that my father was not my father,” says Périér. “It was a terrible shock, because I realized that the man who raised me adopted me. My real father was Black and a very popular singer in France. Suddenly, I understand why at the countryside or the beach, my brother and my sister took three weeks to get a tan... Me? Three hours!” he says with a laugh. “And I'm the only one in the house playing piano since I was four years old, and listening to jazz music.”

This revelation would ultimately lead the young Périér to turn away from the path he had envisaged for himself as a musician. He shares the surreal and pinnacle moment of going to see Salvador in concert at the old Alhambra theater in Paris, after learning that he was his father:

“Thirty musicians and he gets onstage, ‘*Un, deux, trois!*’” he says, whistling. “And I see on the stage everything that I wanted to do, before I knew of his existence. Everything that I had in mind, but it was perfectly done. Finished, you know? Oh *putain!*”

“This night, I took the most important—maybe not the most clever—decision in my life. I thought, ‘My father adopted me when I was born, and so I'm going to adopt him now that I'm sixteen. I'm going to cut everything which looks like this guy [Salvador], and I'm going to try to be like my father [Périér].’ So I closed the piano, and never touched it since then. To me, at this moment, my life is finished. Today...I still think that my life ended that day.”

But despite attempting to cut ties to the music world that he loved, fate—or perhaps the magic of a Fellini set—would quickly lead him back to it. “That's where life has a very strange sense of humor,” says Périér. “In Rome, there is a [photojournalist, Benno Graziani,] who says to me, ‘You want to be a photographer?’ I said yes, but I didn't care! If he'd asked me, ‘You want to be an electrician?’ I would have told him yes! And the man that this journalist presents me to in Paris in September '56 is Daniel Filipacchi. In '56, Daniel Filipacchi ran a radio show called *Pour Ceux Qui Aiment le Jazz* [For Those Who Love Jazz], and he had a magazine called *Jazz Magazine*. He sees me, and in less than three minutes, he says, ‘Okay, you're my assistant.’ And my life changed.”



Tucked away on the Rue Saint-Benoit in Paris's Sixth Arrondissement, the Club Saint-Germain was “a cave with a lot of smoke” where beautiful Parisians rubbed shoulders and made shapes to live performances by the likes of Barney Wilen, Art Blakey, and Django Reinhardt. Among the bon vivants dancing their hazy nights away was French actress Jacqueline Porel, Périér's mother and a “very modern woman,” and from the age of twelve Périér remembers going there each night to find her. With a wide smile, he recounts going up to the ladies monitoring the door and being allowed in to see his mother, despite being clearly underage: “Easy, you know? It was fantastic! The Club Saint-Germain was the center of the world of jazz music. All the jazz guys of America were coming there, because in France they were liked and respected.”

Just a few years later, Périér would be inside the club once more, but this time at the side of the “king of jazz in France,” Daniel Filipacchi, as his assistant. “Suddenly, I am with the best musicians of the world in jazz music—all the guys that I knew by heart—and because I am the friend of Daniel Filipacchi, they talk to me. These guys were thirty, forty years old and talking

to a guy of sixteen looking twelve!” Périér says, laughing. “It was extraordinary.”

Despite the significant age gap between Périér and the artists he was now mingling with and befriending, his love and knowledge of jazz music had primed him to be able to socialize and work with his musical heroes. “They didn't know that I was a musician; I'm just a photographer now. At sixteen, Daniel gives me a Leica and he says, ‘You're going to go on tour with Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis—plane tickets—and you go!’”

Being somewhat thrown into his new role as photojournalist, Périér mastered the craft quickly. The very first photograph that Périér took for Filipacchi—a whimsical shot of Dizzy Gillespie blowing his trumpet into the shimmering waters at Juan-les-Pins in 1958—ended up being on the front cover of *Jazz Magazine*. With fondness in his eyes and a wide, childlike smile, Périér recalls the moments that led up to this particular shot, beginning with waiting for Dizzy at Nice airport: “At this time, you could go out on the tarmac and wait at the stairs. Not like today. There were about fifteen photographers,

(opening spread) Chuck Berry driving his Thunderbird to Mobile, Alabama, October 1964. Photo by Jean-Marie Périér/Photo12.

(top) Dizzy Gillespie at Juan-les-Pins, September 1958, originally published on the cover of *Jazz Magazine*. Photo by Jean-Marie Périér/Photo12.





professional, you know, and me. They were looking at me like, 'Who is this guy? A child with a Leica?!' Dizzy, arriving from New York, walks down and recognizes me, because we had lunch in Paris with Daniel. He jumps on me and says, 'Let's go now. I have a car waiting for me, because my wife is so drunk that she thinks we just arrived to New York!'

"So I go with him," Périer continues, "and the chauffeur takes us to Juan-les-Pins. He tells me in the car, 'When we arrive, immediately in the sea we go.' I said, 'Yes, but take your trumpet so we can take a picture.' 'Okay!' he replied, and that was it!"

Contrary to the staged and stylized aesthetic of Périer's later work, his early images of jazz artists have a natural, on-the-fly style, suiting the spontaneous nature of the genre. Whether candid yet oh-so-cool shots of Miles Davis enjoying the sun with his wife at Juan-les-Pins, or glimpses of what it would be like to drink with Count Basie at a bar in Paris, his photos from this time capture both the charisma of said personalities and the enchanting feel of the epoch.

As one might imagine from spending time on the road with several of jazz's greatest personalities, tales from Périer's travels are as colorful as a Jacques Demy film, and as cool as a Godard flick.

"Ella Fitzgerald—*phew*—I knew all her songs by heart. And on this tour, she had a crush on me," says Périer. Despite being twenty-three years his senior, the First Lady of Song—beloved for her pure honeyed voice and esteemed for the vocal dexterity with which she sang classic songs such as "Cheek to Cheek" and "Dream a Little Dream of Me"—had set her eyes on the Parisian teenager. "I remember one night when she was in the dressing room before the show, Dizzy pushed me in and he closed the door! I was terrified! I was sixteen, and I was as virgin as the tunnel under La Manche, you know? She was a lady for me. But she was very nice and she understood... So nothing happened. But now, I regret it. Imagine you get to start your sex life with Ella Fitzgerald—that's something, *non?*" he says, laughing.





## Salut les Copains

After the dizzying height of touring with a trio of jazz's greatest artists as his very first assignment, Périer's fate took a far less sweet turn in 1960, as he was drafted to join the French army at the time of the Algerian War. When the seven-year-long war finally came to an end and Algeria gained independence in 1962, Périer returned to Paris after a total of twenty-eight months in the army, with fourteen of those months spent on the ground in Algeria. Once home, Périer's luck was to pick up again, though this time through a chance encounter with Filipacchi in Saint-Germain, when Filipacchi asked Périer if he would like to work on his next project: a music magazine for the young people of France.

"I said yes, and that was it," he says, adding a whistle. "We made *Salut les Copains*. It was a huge success. And on this success, Filipacchi built an empire. He bought *Lui* magazine. He made *Elle* magazine in America. He was a mogul of the press."

*Salut les Copains*, taking its name from the energetic Gilbert Bécaud song, began as a radio show hosted by Filipacchi and Frank Ténor in 1959. With a focus on rock and roll, the show was created for the French youth, airing weekdays on Europe 1 at the time schools were let out. The show became immensely influential, popularizing the yé-yé style of French pop and launching the careers of artists such as Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, France Gall, and Michel Polnareff. In '62, Filipacchi launched the magazine format, recruiting Périer as a photographer once more. "You had one TV channel in France. One," he says. "You had three radio channels in France, and *Salut les Copains* was the only show talking about this music. Can you imagine? The magazine and the radio show were the only thing for the whole generation."

Through *Salut les Copains*, Périer came to photograph everyone who was anyone from that era—French artists such as Brigitte Bardot, Serge Gainsbourg, and Françoise Hardy, as well as international superstars including the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. *La Photo du Siècle* was taken by Périer in 1966: a now-iconic group shot, set up like a school class photo, of forty-seven artists of that generation including Gainsbourg, Hardy, Hallyday, Gall, and Michel Berger, among many others.

The magazine was both influential and cool, and Périer was able to work with great creative freedom. At the time, young stars "were scared by absolutely nothing," and for the most part, Périer was now photographing his contemporaries, many of whom he befriended and built lasting personal and professional relationships with. "For twelve years, I only saw musicians, every day!" he says. "I lived with Françoise Hardy for four years; she was my first fiancée. It was strange, because I was making the magazine, but I was also a little inside the magazine."



(above) The Rolling Stones on the train to Marseille, July 1965. (left to right) Brian Jones, Mick Jagger, and Keith Richards. Photo by Jean-Marie Périer/Photo12.







Périer attributes the ease with which he built strong relationships to being around successful artists from a young age. His father, François Périer, worked with some of the greatest directors and actors of his time, including not only Fellini but Jean Cocteau, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roman Polanski. "All the actors of the world were coming to my house when I was young," says Périer. "He was really a great actor, my father. So I knew what it is to have success and the backstage of that life, the fear and the people who try to get your money, who love you [just] because you're famous."

"When I met all these young guys starting out, I knew much more about their future life than they did. I didn't try to look like them. Never. I didn't try to have long hair and...*non*. I wore a tie. Not trying to act like them. The magazine had hired three other photographers, and I remember I sent one of them to take pictures of Bob Dylan. He came back, and he was [dressed like] Bob Dylan! I told him it's ridiculous! Don't try to do that. Just...stay yourself."

### The Rolling Stones

Périer toured with the Rolling Stones in 1965, '69, and '72, when they invented "a way of life...everything," and through this, he witnessed firsthand how the rise in rock and roll's popularity was contributing to shifting attitudes of the time. He remembers being with the Stones in Texas: "A very square country; I mean, you can't believe at this time in the '60s. Trump is Cinderella compared to that. But you see the governor of Texas sending cops backstage, because his wife wants an autograph from Mick Jagger. Guys with Stetsons and his wife—an enormous woman—swoons when Mick gives her an autograph."

"Something's changing now, you know? Like the Beatles in the States when you have their songs on the radio every half hour, for ten years. Now, the roots of that is Chuck Berry and James Brown." Périer had the fortune to tour with both Chuck Berry and James Brown, the two polar experiences providing profound insight into the complex racial tensions in America at this time, and the unique role that music played in beginning to shift and improve race relations.

### Chuck Berry

"Chuck Berry, when I met him in '64, didn't want to spend one dollar!" he says. "He had no manager and no musicians. I traveled the whole South alone with him in his car. It was fantastic." The photos that Périer took of this tour capture both the intimate and the energetic: quiet moments driving along endless roads, as well as of "one of the inventors of rock and roll" performing hits like "You Never Can Tell" and "Johnny B. Goode" to frenzied audiences.

Despite being a bona fide star at this time, with singles such as "Maybellene" and "Roll Over Beethoven" firmly in public rotation and '64 being the year that his comeback album *St. Louis to Liverpool* dropped, Berry's style of touring maintained a beatnik quality and spontaneity, driving between cities in his red Thunderbird and sourcing his backing musicians once he rocked up in each place. "When we stopped in cities where he had a gig, he would go to the universities or bars and take three or four guys, give them some dollars, and that was it!" Périer says, laughing. "And he didn't come onstage before he had the stack of money in cash."

Périer explains Berry's distrust and spendthrift habits as a response to the racism he was subject to in America at the time: "In '64, Black people are [required to sit in] the back of the bus. And he's onstage. All these white people who pay their seat to go and see him and listen to him, they would never have him in their salon, you know? It was very strange, because all these people who were white were [like], 'Oh, I love his music,' but they wouldn't shake his hand. In the street, he's not Chuck Berry. So there is a revenge extraordinaire for him. Oh yes, that's why he was like that."

Périer recounts one time experiencing for himself the racism of the deep South when attempting to check in to a hotel. "When it's sunny," he says with a quick whistle, "I'm Black very fast. We arrived, and Chuck Berry was not going to the hotel—so I go out of the car and into the hotel, but he waits for me—I don't understand why. I go to the hotel and say my name and that I've reserved a room, and the guy says, 'No, you don't have a room. We don't have a room for you.' Because I was very dark, coming out of a car driven by a Black man. He didn't know Chuck Berry. It's so crazy when you realize that they could say no [just] because you're not white."

### James Brown

"James Brown? It was exactly the contrary; it was extraordinary." When Périer met James Brown in 1967, his star was on a meteoric rise, with hits "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" and "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World" under his cape. "I had a fifteen-minute rendezvous to take pictures of him," says Périer. "I arrived to his house and there was a huge gymnasium filled with just one line of Black men. At the end is a massage couch and James Brown is lying down having his hair straightened by a guy with goose fat. He was like a king with people selling him things in line. When I met him, he was on the cover of *Life* magazine—they said, 'Is James Brown the most important Black man in America?' At this time, yes, he was; it was an unbelievable success for a Black man at this time."

"I'm in the line feeling very strange, and when it's my turn, James Brown looks at me and gestures. And then I realize he's talking about the color of the skin. He says, 'You're half and



half.' 'Yes! Yes, absolutely. I'm half and half.' He looks at me and says, 'Phew—you got beautiful hair.' And instead of fifteen minutes, he took me for one week! From fifteen minutes to one week, because I had beautiful hair!"

One of Périer's most iconic shots of Brown is of him dressed all in black, standing in front of his jet plane, his pinky ring glinting as the diamond just catches the sun. "Every day, he was going back to the tour, which was two thousand miles away. I said, 'But why don't you take a hotel room?' He said, 'No, it's impossible, because the guy who does my hair can't take a plane, and he is the only one who is right to touch my hair.' So he was flying every day! It was crazy."

Perhaps James Brown's most revered and seminal record, *Live at the Apollo*, was recorded at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1962, capturing the electricity of his live performances as well as the hysterical adoration of his fans. In 1967, Périer had the privilege of attending the Apollo with Brown: "One night, after we had dinner, he said, 'I'm going to take you to the Apollo.' I was very dark, but I was white, you know? I was half and half. It was very strange to go in Harlem at this time. But with him? No problem with him. He had [box seats] in the Apollo just for him. Only alone, empty. And when he wanted to go—he arrives, and the show stops, stage stops, people stand

up, and everybody claps. He was the king! Oh that was great."

Perhaps one of the most striking things about Périer's somewhat charmed existence is the perfect timing of his encounters. Périer himself appreciates his good fortune, pinning his success to luck and the brilliance of his subjects, without any trace of ego, despite being one of the most celebrated and remembered photographers of his generation: "I realize the luck I have, that my pictures are still seen. All these young musicians that I met in the '60s, they would have made it without me. But me without them? Surely not. But to be lucky is a sort of talent. So the only talent that I think I have is to be lucky."

While Périer can recount memories and paint captivating pictures with words and gestures, he concedes that the stories behind many of his photographs have escaped him: "I remember very few things, actually, because I didn't keep a journal. But—if you remember the '60s, it means you never lived them! It's *fantastique*, because it's true. It was going so fast, plus [with] the smokes and everything, you don't remember!"

Haziness over the details aside, it is clear that Périer has "lived." And of the glamour of Périer's experiences and his ability to laugh and smile with ease in spite of life's ups and downs, I'm sure his mentor Fellini would approve. ●